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REFLECTIONS ON PRACTITIONER RESEARCH: A CASE STUDY IN EFL READING INSTRUCTION

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Abstract:
This paper reflects upon the author's personal experience of practitioner research in my own workplace. The study was conducted to investigate the impact of Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR), a collaborative comprehension strategy instruction with the combination of small group discussion and reading strategies in an EFL context at the university level. The participants were 110 students from two intact classes of a university in southern Taiwan. It adopted a mixed-method design and multiple types of data were collected including a standardised reading measure pre-test and post-test, the participants' responses to a questionnaire survey, field notes, group interviews and transcription data of group discussions during CSR. To start with, this paper defines the practitioner research and discusses the merits and criticism of the practice. It also investigates the challenges in terms of ethical and methodological dilemmas by discussing the teacher's role, ethics consideration as well as the issues of validity and reliability and how I resolved the dilemmas to ensure the quality of the search. It is hoped that these reflections can provide some insights for those who are interested in practitioner research in their own contexts.

Keywords: practitioner research, Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR), EFL reading instruction

1. Introduction

For the past several decades, there has been a growing number of practitioner research studies in educational contexts where teacher-researchers conduct investigations at their work places. Lankshear & Knobel (2004) define teacher-researchers as "*classroom practitioners at any level, from preschool to tertiary, who are involved individually or collaboratively in self-motivated and self-generated systematic and informed inquiry undertaken with a view to enhancing their vocation as professional educators*" (p. 9). It is advocated that

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research done by teachers can contribute to better quality of classroom teaching and learning (Allwright, 2005; Dadds, 1998; Hopkins, 2002; Kennedy-Lewis, 2012; Stenhouse, 1986). As Robson (2002) argues, although outsider researchers may be seen to have greater neutrality in light of being free of shared interest, insider teacher-researchers are familiar with the researched contexts and participants, which may help reduce the problems when designing and implementing the research projects. McDonell (1992) postulates that researching their own classrooms, teachers closely investigate the learning process of their students and their teaching contexts and this teacher inquiry "*lends itself to educational reform from within*" (p. 171).

In this study, I implemented CSR, a collaborative comprehension strategy instruction proposed by Klingner et al. (1998) at my workplace, a university in southern Taiwan to examine if it could be an effective approach to enhance students' reading comprehension and increase their motivation in English learning. A pilot study was conducted before the main fieldwork to discover any methodological flaws and weaknesses of the research design. A quasi-experiment design was used, but it was on a smaller scale than in the main study. There was no control group because my main concern at this stage was to detect any unexpected problems with implementation.

In the main study, two intact classes totally 110 students taught by the researcher participated in this study. One of the classes was assigned as the control group with the traditional teacher-led reading approach, while the other was the experimental group receiving CSR instruction. The quasi-experiment lasted for 14 weeks and multiple types of data were collected including a standardised reading measure pre-test and post-test, the participants' responses to a questionnaire survey, field notes, group interviews and transcription data of group discussions during CSR. Being a university teacher for many years, I have the benefit of understanding the general matters in university English education in Taiwan and particular issues related to reading instruction in my teaching context. Thus, I believed that I was in a good position to seek an alternative intervention from which students may benefit with regard to their English learning.

In spite of the advantages, practitioner research receives criticism as well. Huberman (1996) questions the possibility of teachers functioning as researchers simultaneously and expresses concern that teacher-researchers' biases may run the risk of endangering the quality of their research. Mercer (2007) reveals that a great amount of existing teacher research does not well discuss the ethical dilemmas of insiderness. Similarly, Campell et al. (2004) also warn us that, 'small-scale research into one's practice is often open to criticism of lack of objectivity and rigour' (p. 84). Being aware of the controversial problems of practitioner research, I understood that it is difficult to overcome the limits of being in dual roles. When planning and conducting this research, I acknowledged my own bias and subjectivity, that is, my belief that CSR might be a better reading model than a traditional teacher-led approach in terms of enhancing students' strategic reading and providing opportunities for them to be more responsible for their learning. However, I also questioned exactly how much impact CSR would have on the university students' reading comprehension and precisely how it would influence the way learners construct meaning from the text.

Stenhouse (1986) argues that subjectivity and biases are an inescapable part of teacher research because individuals have unique ways of interpreting and understanding things, and that the teacher-researcher should develop a sensitive, self-critical and subjective perspective toward his/her research project. In this study, I documented the whole process of the implementation of CSR. Although it is not an easy task, I tried to avoid the influence of my beliefs, attitudes, and expectations on the respondents and reminded myself of the importance of being neutral.

2. Ethical Considerations

Research projects involve ethical considerations throughout all the stages of the process from the beginning to the final stages. Failure to consider ethical issues may result in invalid research (Brannen, 1992; Bryman, 2001; Creswell, 1994; Hopkins, 2002; Kennedy-Lewis, 2012; Mercer, 2007; Mohr, 2001; Nolen & Putten, 2007; Punch, 1998). In educational research, it is imperative to obtain informed consent from participants and guarantee confidentiality and anonymity so that their rights and privacy are protected. However, being aware that ethical issues in practitioner research are complex, I found myself in dilemmas owing to my responsibility and relationship to my students. In this section, I will address these issues.

The importance of gaining the informed consent of participants in research projects has been highlighted by a substantial number of authors. The purpose of the informed consent, according to Arksey & Knight (1999), is to "safeguard participants' privacy and welfare and to give them a choice about whether or not to take part in a study" (p. 129). In my study, the purpose of the research was explained so that the participants, particularly in the experimental group, could understand the research project in which they would be involved. However, I struggled to decide how much information about this research the control group should be given. Since the students in the control group received the teacher-led reading approach, the only task they did was to take the reading comprehension test twice. I chose not to inform them about all the details of the research including that there was another class assigned as an experimental group for fear that they would feel that they needed to compete with another class.

Informed consent was obtained from both groups before the experiment started and their voluntary participation was ensured, that is, they were informed that they could withdraw at any stage of the research of their own free will. The researcher also promised that their personal identities and details would not be disclosed and the data collected from them would be treated as highly confidential. In addition, their names in any publications regarding the report of this field work would be anonymous to protect their privacy.

In any form of research, precautions should be taken to prevent participants from any possible harm (Cohen et al., 2000; Lankshear & Knobel, 2004; Punch, 1998; Robson, 2002). How to minimize the potential harm to the participants was another potential ethical difficulty for me. In this study, it was possible that the experimental

group might benefit from the intervention by improving their strategic reading ability and enhancing their learner autonomy. In contrast, the participants in the control group might be disadvantaged by being assigned to the traditional teacher-led approach. I understood it was my obligation to look after students' interest and was confident that I was a competent teacher so that the control group would benefit from my teaching. The course evaluation held by the university at the end of the semester provided evidence that both of the groups thought that the instructional approaches in which they were involved were beneficial to their English learning. In addition, I switched over the teaching methods for the two groups after the post-test to ensure that none of the subjects was in any way disadvantaged by the intervention.

In addition, I was concerned with the potential effects of the unequal relationship between me, the researcher, and the students taking part in this research project. I did not see my students merely as the subjects recruited to test the effectiveness and feasibility of an alternative instructional approach; instead, I attempted to establish, as Mohr (2001) suggests, a cooperative relationship with my students. Their genuine positive or negative comments, perceptions, feedback on the intervention were essential to provide better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of CSR.

3. Validity and Reliability of the Study

Two of the most important methodological issues to address in all kinds of research design are validity and reliability of the measuring instruments. According to Punch (1998), validity refers to whether or not an instrument measures the concept that the researcher wants to measure while reliability refers to the consistency of the results. Reliability is a necessary precondition of validity, but reliability is not sufficient condition for validity in research. Validity is crucial and the most important criterion for effective research (Berg, 2001; Cohen et al., 2000). There are various types of validity and it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss them in detail. In this section, I will, however, discuss how internal validity, external validity and reliability were dealt with to ensure the quality of the present study.

3.1 Internal Validity

Internal validity or credibility in qualitative research is "*the extent to which the study and its findings are accurate and truthful*" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004, p.67).

To ensure internal validity, as Maxwell (2005) asserts, it is important to identify and rule out alternative explanations to the findings. A common suggestion is to use triangulation to cross-check the data from different perspectives to enhance the internal validity of the research. As I have discussed earlier, the study used multiple sources of data as an approach for methodological triangulation.

Now I should turn to other steps I took to deal with this issue of internal validity. In this present study, potential threats to internal validity in the quasi-experimental design, such as using inappropriate implementation procedures and testing measures, were identified and actions were taken to eliminate them. During the experiment, I

made sure that the instructional content in the control and experimental group lessons was the same except for the different instructional formats. To ensure that there was comparable data to gauge the effect of CSR on the university learners' reading comprehension, the same reading measure was administered at the beginning (pre-test) and 14 weeks later, at the end of the CSR intervention (post-test). When taking the pre-test, the students were asked not to make any remarks on the questions and to write down their answers on the answer sheets only. They were not told that they would re-take the test. I believe that the memory factor, which could have affected the results of the post-test, was thereby minimized.

As CSR is a novel reading approach for the students, I was cautious that this might bring about the Hawthorne effect (reactivity), which occurs when participants are placed in a new situation (Bryman, 2001; Cohen et al., 2000; Cook & Campbell, 1979; Patton, 2002). I understood that it was very challenging to eliminate the possibilities that the participants might behave differently to meet the researcher's expectation, However, as intentional behaviours are difficult to sustain over time, multiple observations were conducted in this study to mitigate the possible impact of the Hawthorne effect. In addition, I was concerned that the interviewees might please me with their replies in group interviews. To avoid this and probe the informants' frank responses to CSR, the interviews were held after the final exam.

Referential adequacy was another technique used to check internal validity. According to Lincoln & Guba (1985), using audiotapes or any other electrical appliances to collect data is one way of ensuring referential adequacy and enhancing credibility. In this study, the group interviews and discussions were audio taped. The recordings can be used to scrutinize the authenticity of the analysis and interpretations and allow the researcher to provide a rich description.

Peer debriefing was also used to validate the findings and interpretations of this study. Lincoln & Cuba (1985) defines peer debriefing as "*a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytic session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within an inquirer's mind*" (p. 308). This concept is particularly important for the present study because the researcher examined her own practice alone and the peer review helped challenge and scrutinize the research. To this end, the researcher discussed her work with colleagues, participated in research seminars and gave presentations in conferences to audiences who are knowledgeable and experienced in the field of language teaching and learning. Through sharing and interacting with peers, some ambiguity was clarified and peer feedback helped the researcher enhance the rigor of the study.

3.2 External Validity

External validity or transferability in qualitative research is related to generalization. It is associated with the degree to which the research findings can be generalized beyond the particular populations and contexts (Cohen et al., 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Flick, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 2006). According to Punch (1998), quantitative experimental designs with probability sampling and random assignment generally

involve a higher degree of generalization. In contrast, teacher research within particular groups, settings and conditions does not yield generalizable outcomes, and the issue of generalization does not tend to be the focus (Hopkins, 2002; Lankshear & Knobel, 2004). Since this study was bound to a particular context and the research sample was not representative, the findings cannot be generalized to other research contexts with university learners in Taiwan. However, it was believed that this study could provide valuable insights to those who are interested in adopting CSR in similar classroom settings.

3.3 Reliability

Reliability is a crucial term in measurement, and it is associated with consistency and stability of measures or findings. A reliable instrument will obtain the same results if it is applied to the same group of people at a different time. In contrast to repeatability and stability, reliability in qualitative research refers to "a fit between what researchers record as data and what actually occurs in the natural setting that is being researched" (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 119). In other words, the dependability of the research procedures and data should be checked to determine if the research implementation is reliable. To enhance the consistency and dependability of the research, it is advocated that a pilot study should be carried out before the real field work starts (Bryman, 2001; Oppenheim, 1992; Punch, 1998; Robson, 2002). I believe that the pilot study discussed in 3.5.1 helped strengthen the reliability of this research project.

In this study, another independent coder was given the research objectives, the initial categories and description of each category for the purpose of coding consistency check (Cohen et al., 2000; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002; Silverman, 2001). According to Miles & Huberman (1994), coding-check involves two individuals coding the same data set. It is a good reliability check to clarify or confirm the findings. When uncertainties or discrepancies occurred, we discussed and verified the interpretations to reach a consensus on the appropriate classification of the utterances.

Furthermore, Cohen et al. (2000) suggest that the reliability of the research can be checked through respondent validation, a strategy employed to examine the accuracy of the results by obtaining feedback from the research participants. Maxwell (2005) strongly argues that it is "*the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on*" (p. 111). To facilitate respondent validation, the transcriptions of the group interviews were e-mailed to the informants for feedback and validation. It was found that the interviewees agreed with the transcripts and only some typing errors were needed to be corrected.

4. Conclusion and Implication

The practitioner research reported in this study adopted a mixed-method design and quantitative as well as qualitative types of data were collected including a standardised reading measure pre-test and post-test, the participants' responses to a questionnaire

survey, field notes, group interviews and transcription data of group discussions during CSR. It is believed that the mix-method design not only provided a methodological triangulation, which aimed to enhance the rigor of the study, but also as far as possible remove any bias inherent in the separate data sources. In addition, this study discussed the ethical and methodological challenges the researcher encountered when conducting the insider research by discussing the teacher's role, ethics consideration as well as the issues of validity and reliability and how I resolved the dilemmas to ensure the quality of the search. It is hoped that these reflections can provide some insights for those who are interested in practitioner research in their own contexts.

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